

Clouds of Thunder

Von Karu

Kapitel 2: The slowly whitening mountain ridge

This time Aoki – probably because there is no superior in the close vicinity – pretty much dumps me the moment we're out of the Body Flicker. I stagger two dangerous steps forward at the rough handling, but at least I don't end up face first on the floor.

He's already off my side the moment I get my bearings, having walked up to a counter at the far end of the room he brought us into. I thought he'd take me back to his own place probably, or drag me through the village, and don't really know what to make of this environment and the various ninja staring at me from all over the room.

We have to be somewhere in the shinobi head quarters, maybe even still in the Raikage's tower. It's an administrative room or something similar, for getting information on missions or the likes, because most ninja carry scrolls or papers with them and from their general age I guess them to be too old to be Genin.

Most of them have the dark skin color that seems to be native to the Cloud Village, are male, tall and muscular. There are some women however, and I spot three people with skin just as or maybe even more white than mine.

They don't seem hostile, simply curious for who I am, but I nonetheless hurry over towards Aoki, who is talking to the guy manning the counter – a Chuunin then, because Jounin are too valuable to spend their time standing around and handling daily paperwork. The boy is younger than I am and gives me a curt nod before turning his head back to my captor, who is rattling down a list it seems.

"...pants and a cloak," Aoki pauses for a moment to sneer down at me, "Usui freezes easily."

The clerk studies me then, obviously having gotten the message that Aoki meant me when he said "Usui". He doesn't comment however, just stares a moment longer before hurrying off with the promise to be back shortly.

Of course it will be like that. When he apologized after the Nidaime had scolded him I'd thought that Aoki would stick to Saeko, just to not have to go against orders, but that had been too much to wish for, obviously. Now I'm stuck with that fucking nickname, and he'll probably tell it to everyone he introduces me to, just because he can – yes, he's a total asshole and ninja food chain says that no one will object as long

as the Raikage won't hear...

"Aoki-sama," the Chuunin bows before holding out a big bundle of cloths to the man, who just indicates in my direction with a shrug of his head.

So the cloth gets pressed into my open arms instead, the bundle almost too much for me to carry without dropping something on the floor. That's what Aoki wants to happen I guess, but I won't give him the satisfaction.

"Follow," he orders me around like a dog and the urge to just stand there, ignore him and go somewhere else is damn strong, but then where would I go? I don't even have a clue where the hell I am in this village, and even if I did Aoki could fetch me back to his sides in seconds. There is no outrunning a ninja for ordinary humans, and I'd rather spare myself the humiliation of having him dragging me around like a disobedient child, thank you very much.

He leads me through a hallway before stopping in front of a random door so suddenly that I almost run into him. *Bastard.*

"Change," he points at the door for emphasis before ignoring me altogether and pointedly leaning against the wall beside it.

With a sigh I'm through said door and find myself in a windowless room with two long benches in front of the niches in the left and right walls respectively. It's obviously the dressing room for shinobi coming from or going for missions or training, and for a second I'm tempted to grab into one of the niches and take out what is inside – then I remember that this ninja-land and that I'd better not touch anything that could be protected by a seal or jutsu.

I let the bundle fall on one of the benches and take stock. There is a gray sweater, black pants and socks, a mesh-t-shirt – seriously, what are these things good for anyway? They don't keep you warm, they don't protect you from *anything*, and have to be a pain to get in and out of – plus a white cloak like the one Aoki had lent me a few hours ago and high, black boots.

That Chuunin has to be really good at guessing sizes, because everything fits nicely. Even the boots have the right size, and that's gotta be hard to see from one glance. They don't have much of a heel though, and there goes my idea of appearing to be at least a little taller than I actually am.

When I pick up the cloak to check if it's not too long another white piece of cloth slides to the floor from within its folds. I pick it up curiously and then look at what appears like a wide, solid, white band of something that is *not* normal cloth.

For a while I just stare at the thing, clueless as to what its purpose could be. I hold it away from my body to get a closer look, then squint at the thick seams in concentration. Maybe if I turn it – ah, that looks familiar. I've seen that somewhere... it clicks after a few more seconds of staring: it's a modified version of the Kumogakure shinobi vest. I've seen some of the modern kunochi wear them, actually.

A little fumbling and I'm fully clothed, even though I still have no idea why Aoki has me wear shinobi gear. He's probably just too cheap to buy me something from his own money, but I can't be sure.

I'd really like to see myself in a mirror right now, just to know whether or not I look completely ridiculous in shinobi gear, but there is none – guess that Kumo-nin don't give a shit about how good they look when they go out to slaughter enemy shinobi.

At least I fit in rather well with the general appearance here: light skin, blond hair, blue eyes. The majority of people has dark skin and eyes of course, but I've seen enough inhabitants of Kumogakure to guess that they tend to either be one or the other extreme, light or dark. With my small height having become mediocre here – gotta love these Japanese standards on height – I shouldn't attract much unnecessary attention.

Straightening my new shirt one final time as good as the protective vest over my belly allows, I grab my things and open the door to the dressing room. Aoki's gaze sweeps over me from head to toe but he doesn't comment on my new attire.

His eyes narrow however when he sees the bundle under my arm, "Leave that here."

He looks at my sweater and sweatpants like they carry a lethal disease, and I instantly know what's coming. It had to happen at some point, because while I will be obedient and shut my mouth to avoid trouble, there's a line you better don't cross with me. He's just saying that because he *can*, because he's a ninja and that automatically makes him top dog between the two of us. This is him being an asshole for no other purpose than to get at me, and I won't fucking stand for that.

"No," I look into his eyes when I say it, just so he knows that I mean it. I won't *ever* bow to him, and he has something else coming if he thinks that he can push me around and I'll let him. Not happening.

Aoki makes a noise that is as much displeasure as it is disdain. He stares back and is suddenly, in the same moment, standing in front me. I didn't even see him *move*.

"This," he points at the clothes under my arm, "Is garbage."

Fuck, he is intimidating like this. No black lightning on his hand or blade to my throat, because he doesn't need any of that to beat me to a pulp. The knowledge is... disturbing. Nothing to make your throat feel like the desert and your heart want to spring out of your chest than an elite ninja standing half a meter away from you with that look in his eyes.

"It's *mine*," I answer him, trying not to let any of that fear I feel show on my face. He will pounce on that, it's what he's trained to do – but those pants and sweater are everything I've still left from my home, and dammit I will not give up the only *real* thing still in my possession just because Aoki's decided to show me who's boss.

"I can kill you," he whispers, the tone of his voice making a an involuntary shiver run down my spine. He sees of course, his lips drawing into a predatory grin at my reaction.

So that's where we stand: *behaving* or death threats – oh no, you won't get away with that mister! I'm not that stupid, not with having seen the way the Raikage looked at me when he realized I can speak a language foreign to them. Whatever he wants of me was enough to make him appoint Aoki my babysitter, and killing the price isn't something he can get away with easily.

There is nothing I can do to threaten him back however, and I also haven't forgotten the fact that he seems to *like* treating me like shit for whatever reason. Fine, then. He can call me Usui all day long if he wants to, he can be mean and disrespectful and an outright asshole, but hating me can't equal taking my freedom away from me. I'm just as human as him, even if that seems to be only thing we have in common at the moment, *being human*.

"I know," is all I say, crossing my arms in front of my chest. It's not the argument per se I need to win here, just getting him to see that I'm not backing down.

Threatening Aoki would be ridiculous and remaining silent the admittance of defeat. I'm overly aware of both while at the same trying my damndest to not give away my own insecurity – if a bully thinks that they can get to you they'll never stop trying.

For a second the silence seems to just stretch and stretch between us, and then he actually laughs, a sound of pure amusement that startles me and makes me flinch away a little from his intimidating presence. His posture relaxes a moment later though, the tension leaving his body in an instant and the gleam of his dark eyes losing it's dangerous edge.

Without any warning he snatches my clothes out of my arm and I scream in both protest and righteous fury, livid now because *how dare he*, the bastard, I'll-

An annoyed growl leaves his lips as he holds me back with his left arm, pulls a scroll out of the pouch at his side with his right hand and seals my clothes into it while totally ignoring the way I'm trying to reach for my things over his arm.

The scroll is shoved into my hands before I can articulate my rage in my broken Japanese.

"Yours, keep it," that's everything he says, not bothering to explain before he grabs me by the upper arm and pulls me down the corridor beside him, stifling any protest I'd have voiced with his impatient stride.

I have no clue where he'll lead me to this time, but if you don't have the option of actually being included in the decision-making process you stop caring, I guess. The important thing is the scroll with my clothes clutched tightly in my right hand anyway. Since I don't have chakra I won't be able to open it on my own, I know that, but either Aoki can or I'll find a way to get the Nidaime to unseal the content for me.

We walk through two more corridors and end up in what has to be the main entrance of the building, with various stairs leading both up and down into the mountain. Shinobi are everywhere and this time some are small enough to be Genin, the youngest I see maybe ten years old – I force myself not to think of the moral implications of sending kids that young into battle.

Most people don't spare us a second glance, and those who do usually just nod to Aoki before hurrying on with their tasks. Only two really *look* at me, a man who is all dark colors, hair, eyes, skin, uniform and all, and a woman with the same dark skin and eyes like molten gold. Her gaze fascinates me simply for the fact that her eye color should feel *unnatural* to me but doesn't. Instead it only makes me stare after her when she has passed us, my eyes drawn to the long sword on her back and the fact that she seems to *float* rather than walk.

A hard shake of my shoulder makes me turn back to face Aoki, who for some reason has a, well, *wicked*, grin on his lips when he first looks at the woman I was staring at and then back to me. I wait for him to explain himself, but he doesn't and just drags me out the front door.

Outside I realize that we were indeed still inside the Raikage's tower, and only from below can I see how high it really is – that thing could rival a skyscraper. The top of it vanishes into the clouds, as do several other buildings crafted into the other mountains – they rise from the ground like spikes, steep and sharp.

The whole area seems to be one giant mountain chain however, because the streets gently slope downwards from the tower, perhaps leading to the center of the village. If the layout is similar to that of Konoha than the tower marks the far end of the village, away from both the main hustle of daily activities and the gates where enemies would arrive should they ever besiege Kumogakure.

I look down the street we're standing on and *stare*.

Even in the dimmed, gray lighted that manages to come through the clouds this place is truly beautiful: the houses are wooden and two-storied with banners marking the entrances to various shops, the street cobbled and only interrupted by stairs where the drop of the hill is too steep to span otherwise.

Sometimes there's a tree in front of a house or a little garden, vines ranking up the odd building. People mingle freely on the street, ninja and civilians with children chasing each other through the crowd, laughing and almost knocking down an old man who angrily waves his cane as they pass him.

It's *old* on a level I can't explain, so far away from the streets I walked in Tokyo and Osaka or even the ancient capital Kyoto. This is a part of the traditional Japan I never got to see before.

"It's beautiful," I tell Aoki who is now walking beside me instead of trying to push me along, but he just looks at me as if I'm nuts.

All the streets aren't very wide, not enough to let more than one carriage through at a time, but I don't know if the design is deliberate or simply stems from the fact that they for whatever reason don't have any need to carry large objects through the village.

The burbling of water distracts me and I wander closer to the sound of what has to be a fountain, but then Aoki's hand is on my shoulder *again* and he's steering me away from the water and into another street. He's not being gentle about it this time either.

"Why not that way?" I try to articulate myself as intelligible as possible, but my only answer is a low growl. My captor doesn't even spare me a glance, just goes on through the civilians who automatically clear the way for him. I wonder if he even notices, but then decide against it – Aoki has a frown on his face that could be either deep concentration or a dislike for people in general.

Well, if he wants to sulk that's fine with me... and if he thinks he is the only one of the two of us who can make the other's life unnecessary complicated he is sadly mistaken.

"Is it always cold here? What season do we have?" To hell with speaking perfect Japanese, he'll get the gist of it. I don't think the man will answer me anyway, so it doesn't matter how polite or correct or nicely I ask. *Two can play that game.*

His cold gaze is meant to get me to shut up, but we're playing by my rules now, and my rules say that I will only shut up if he gives me answers – I press my lips together to stop the smile from forming on my face. Let's see how long he takes to figure out how this works, or if he does so at all.

"Are those ninja, too?" I point to what has to be a group of Genin who stand in front of a weapons shop and stare at the katana on display for the customers on the street, "Why are they so young?"

He realizes that something is on now, his left hand seizing my upper arm harshly and staying there to pull me alongside him. Still no talking though, and I wonder if he thinks that talking to me would be pointless. Or is he just pissed that whatever he did with that Black Lightning backfired and he has to babysit me because he fucked up?

I open my mouth to ask about the buildings in the mountains, but the sudden grumbling of my stomach makes me close it and remember that my last meal was some too many hours ago – I hate going without food, it makes me cranky as hell. No idea how I missed how *hungry* I am for so long, but the smells coming from the street we just entered make my mouth water.

"Can we eat something?" I ask as politely as possible, looking up at Aoki with my best innocent face.

This part of town is busier, with the food vendors on both sides of the road selling every kind of Japanese food. There are many shops that offer grilled meat or fish, I

see at least one that has noodles – no ramen, sadly – many sell sweets, and one something that looks suspiciously like bento boxes.

My companion just makes an annoyed sound of refusal, something that could be a grunt or a curse but isn't really language. He obviously doesn't want to be bothered with something as trivial as me wanting food. *Though look, buddy.*

"I want to eat. Now," I demand, stopping dead in the middle of the road. My face clearly tells him the rest of the sentence... *and I won't stop nagging you until you give it to me.*

Aoki has two options now: doing what I want and getting me something to eat, or making a scene. He could try to drag me away of course, but he better doesn't dare because then I will shout, and it will be *loud*, and people will look. Good luck to him trying to stop me from making everyone in that street aware of the fact that he is shoving me around – if they don't have the chance to look away most people don't like seeing petite women treated badly by men twice their size.

We obviously have come to the same conclusion here, as he curses under his breath, let's go of my arm and motions towards a *yakitori* shop a little further down the street.

The inside of the shop is small but still larger than I thought it would be. Most people sit directly at the counter, but Aoki leads me towards the few tables that fit inside the room, choosing the one furthest from the entrance. He pushes me down on a bench with a grumbled "Sit!" that tells me to better behave or else.

There's nothing for him to fear though, because I'm certainly not leaving before I've had food.

A young women, no older than sixteen or seventeen, comes over to me immediately. She's fast in filling two glasses with water, but avoids my eyes when I give her a nod of thanks and has bowed and left for another new customer before I can get a second look at her.

It's probably the fact that she's a civilian and I'm dressed like a kunoichi that makes her uneasy. I'm not wearing a headband, but that doesn't have to mean anything and I have no clue what the general interaction between ninja and normal citizens is like here.

I flinch when a plate is brought down *hard* on the table in front of me – Aoki's movements are completely silent when he wants them to be... I guess he's a Jounin, and a high-ranking one of those. Satisfaction shines in his eyes when he sees my reaction, but he doesn't say anything. I just get a look that tells me to better hurry up, because he *obviously* thinks of this as a waste of his time.

Well, no need to tell me. The food smells delicious: it's two different kind of skewers, one with chicken and vegetables and the other at closer inspection turning out to be small potatoes soaked in some sauce before being put on the grill.

At least I'm lucky enough that I'm not allergic to any of those things, because right now I'd rather not explain to Aoki what an allergy is.

"There you are, Jiro," a male voice pulls me out of my musings, making my head snap up from that great food just in time to see two unknown ninja sitting down beside Aoki. The woman is light and tall with huge boobs and the man looks- pretty much like Aoki, if you discount the ugly burn scar through half his face.

His eyes are the pure white of those who have lost their sight forever and the bright pink of the skin around his eyes and on both his cheeks is a stark contrast to his otherwise dark color. It's a burn scar, the abused skin looking leathery and like a web of thin threads put on top of each other.

"Who's this?" the woman asks and leans closer to me, drawing my eyes to her breasts as they push up against the wood of the table.

She's pretty, very much so. Her hair is light blond and almost to her waist, she has very light skin and dark grey eyes. I need a moment to get used to the imagine, but then remember where I have seen her features before: Samui – same large breasts obviously, if that is any indication for kinship. She is her mother then- or more likely her grandmother, since this the Nidaime's reign and Samui lives under the Yondaime. Interesting.

Aoki manages to look bored and devious at once, "Usui."

Of course... the woman can't suppress a snort, her eyebrows rising high enough to vanish behind her bangs. It's not personal on her part *yet*, but I don't want that nickname to stick.

"I'm Saeko," I tell her, bowing as far as the table will allow, "It's a pleasure meeting you."

For a second she looks startled, her eyes wandering from me to Aoki and back, but then a small smile forms on her lips. She bows back, as is proper, and introduces herself, "Okada, Akemi. Nice to meet you."

"Saeko... how do you write it?" the blind man's voice is deep and gentle. If the burns from his eyes were from a fire he would have inhaled too much smoke for it to still sound that way – that's definitely a battle scar, then. One primarily made not to kill, but to hurt, to cause pain. I don't really want to know where and how he got it, if I'm honest with myself.

He holds one hand out to me expectantly and I don't really know what to do until Akemi stabs with the fingers of her right hand into the palm of her left. Ah, he wants me to write the kanji.

His hands are big, all but dwarfing mine. I try really hard to make my writing as clear as possible, but he still asks me to do the second of the three symbols for a second time.

He is silent for a moment after that, most likely contemplating what the name means and how I got it.

"Aoki, Ichiro," he introduces himself at least, and my gaze wanders to Aoki – Jiro – who doesn't like that his brother plays nice with me. His face is sour, but he doesn't say anything and I wonder if it is because Ichiro would admonish him for treating me badly the same way the Raikage had done. That they are brothers doesn't mean that they have to be of the same mind.

"Let's go Ichiro," Aoki stands abruptly and places one hand on his brother's shoulder, "Akemi, you take care of Usui?"

Yes, *please*. At least with her I have a decent chance of getting information for once, not to mention the fact that she seems like a more agreeable person than Aoki. It would be nice to really talk to someone for a change instead of his grunts and shoving.

"Sure," the woman agrees, shrugging her shoulders. She asks him something right after that, but it's too fast and too low for me to make sense of the words on the fly – damn my shit Japanese. I'm really curious what she asked, especially since she doesn't know that I can't speak their language that well. Maybe I can ask her-

"Later," is all Aoki answers, and the sidelong glance he gives me when he says it tells me pretty much that he doesn't want me to listen in on whatever Akemi wants to know.

The men leave with a short farewell from Ichiro. I automatically look into his face as he talks, and regret it a moment later because his mutilation is as fascinating as it is horrible. If I see him more often I will have to learn to stop staring – he's a ninja, I'm sure he noticed my eyes on his face.

Akemi waves after them before turning her gray eyes back to me. My food is long gone, and she seems to take the empty plate as a signal to get us some more of that really good *yakitori*, "Wait a second, I'll be right back."

Well, I'm certainly not protesting against that.